

The Taint of “Social Darwinism”

—*Philip Kitcher*

GIVEN THE WELL-KNOWN REPUBLICAN ANTIPATHY TO EVOLUTION, President Obama’s recent description of the Republican budget as an example of “social Darwinism” may be a canny piece of political labeling. In the interests of historical accuracy, however, it should be clearly recognized that social Darwinism has very little to do with the ideas developed by Charles Darwin in *On the Origin of Species*. Social Darwinism emerged as a movement in the late nineteenth century and has had waves of popularity ever since, but its central ideas owe more to the thought of a luminary of that time, Herbert Spencer, whose writings are (to understate) no longer widely read.

Spencer, who coined the phrase “survival of the fittest,” thought about natural selection on a grand scale. Conceiving selection in pre-Darwinian terms—as a ruthless process, “red in tooth and claw”—he viewed human culture and human societies as progressing through fierce competition. Provided that policy makers do not take foolish steps to protect the weak, those people and those human achievements that are fittest—most beautiful, noble, wise, creative, virtuous, and so forth—will succeed in a fierce competition, so that, over time, humanity and its accomplishments will continually improve. Late nineteenth-century dynastic capitalists, especially the American “robber barons,” found this vision profoundly congenial. Their contemporary successors like it for much the same reasons, just as

some adolescents discover an inspiring reinforcement of their self-image in the writings of Ayn Rand.

Although social Darwinism has often been closely connected with ideas in eugenics (pampering the weak will lead to the “decline of the race”) and with theories of racial superiority (the economic and political dominance of people of North European extraction is a sign that some racial groups are intrinsically better than others), these are not central to the position.

The heart of social Darwinism is a pair of theses: first, people have intrinsic abilities and talents (and, correspondingly, intrinsic weaknesses), which will be expressed in their actions and achievements, independently of the social, economic and cultural environments in which they develop; second, intensifying competition enables the most talented to develop their potential to the full and thereby to provide resources for a society that make life better for all. It is not entirely implausible to think that doctrines like these stand behind a vast swath of Republican proposals, including the recent budget, with its emphasis on providing greater economic benefits to the rich, transferring the burden to the middle classes and poor, and especially in its proposals for reducing public services. Fuzzier versions of the theses have pervaded Republican rhetoric for the past decade (and even longer).

There are very good reasons to think both theses are false. Especially in the case of the Republican dynasties of our day, the Bushes and the Romneys, success has been facilitated by all kinds of social structures, by educational opportunities and legal restrictions, that were in place prior to and independently of their personal efforts or achievements. For those born into environments in which silver spoons rarely appear—Barack Obama, for instance—the contributions of the social environment are even more apparent. Without enormous support, access to inspiring teachers and skillful doctors, the backing of self-sacrificing relatives and a broader community, and without a fair bit of luck, the vast majority of people, not only in the United States but throughout the world, would never achieve the things of which they are, in principle, capable. In short, Horatio

Alger needs lots of help, and a large thrust of contemporary Republican policy is dedicated to making sure he doesn't get it.

Second, even if rigorous competition enables the talented—or, better, the lucky—to realize their goals, it is completely unwarranted to suppose that their accomplishments will translate into any increased benefit for the overwhelming majority of those who are less fortunate. The strenuous struggle social Darwinism envisages might select for something, but the most likely traits are a tendency to take whatever steps are necessary to achieve a foreseeable end, a sharp focus on narrowly individual goals and a corresponding disregard for others. We might reasonably expect that a world run on social Darwinist lines would generate a cadre of plutocrats, each resolutely concerned to establish a dynasty and to secure his favored branch of industry against future competition. In practical terms it would almost certainly yield a world in which the gap between rich and poor was even larger than it is now.

Rather than the beauty, wisdom, virtue and nobility Spencer envisioned arising from fierce competition, the likely products would be laws repealing inheritance taxes and deregulating profitable activities, and a vast population of people whose lives were even further diminished.

Yet, even if stimulating competition would achieve greater economic productivity, and even if this would, by some miraculous mechanism, yield a more egalitarian distribution of economic resources (presumably through the provision of more remunerative jobs), these welcome material benefits are not all that is needed. To quote a much-cited book, we do not "live by bread alone." If the vast majority of citizens (or, globally, of people) are to enjoy any opportunities to develop the talents they have, they need the social structures social Darwinism perceives as pampering and counterproductive. Human well-being is profoundly affected by public goods, a concept that is entirely antithetical to social Darwinism or to contemporary Republican ideology, with their mythical citizens who can fulfill their potential without rich systems of social support. It is a callous fiction to suppose that what is needed is less

investment in education, health care, public transportation and affordable public housing.

So long as social Darwinism is disentangled from the ancillary eugenic and racist ideas, so long as it is viewed in its core form of the two theses about the glories of competition, the label President Obama pinned on the Republican budget is completely deserved. Because the central ideas of social Darwinism are equally false and noxious, a commitment to truth in advertising should welcome the label. And all of us, including President Obama and the many people whose less spectacular successes have been enabled by social structures and public goods, should hope that the name leads Darwin-hating conservatives to worry about the Republican budget.

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